

December 19, 2010 Return from Exile – Nehemiah 8:1-18 -- Notes

What happens when a community comes together to hear the written word of God proclaimed and interpreted?

Last week, temple destroyed, in exile, valley of dry bones

This week, return from exile, rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem; not under independent rule; Persians); conquest of Alexander the Great – changes happening; people have a new identity w/God – not just about being a kingdom, but being a people of God who gather around God's word

Neh 8 – the people request to hear God's word, but don't necessarily know it. Not forced to be there; ask to be there; God's people are to gather around God's word

What happens when they hear God's word/law spoken? Confusion, sorrow, weeping
Why? They didn't know what they heard; didn't understand it; were confronted by their sin

Truth – the word of God reveals our sins

How many people would accept that kind of invitation to worship w/you on Sunday morning: "Come, join us for worship where we hear the Word of God proclaimed and are reminded what sinful, awful people we can be." Do you think anyone would come with you? Maybe not necessarily put it that way, but the Word of God reveals our sins.

We know that we can hand our sins over to God. We know that when we ask, God offers us something else – forgiveness. But, it's still hard to think of the despair that can be caused when our sin is revealed by God's word.

Surprise! That's not all that is revealed. The people who returned from exile are not left in their despair. They are not left alone clueless as to what God's word/law means for them; there are those among them that are helping them interpret what has been read to them! We can read God's word by ourselves, in isolation from others, and think we know what it means for us, but there is something about the word of God being revealed to us in community!

The word of God also reveals hope and that hope becomes a call to joy.

Story: Mira, a Haitian woman, unable to get out of a building when the earth began to shake; fell to her knees and covered her head; buried in the rubble for 5 days, on her knees; when asked by reporters how she made it through that time, that despair and pain; she said it was the word of God; everyday she had read the Bible, so when she was trapped, she started to recite it to herself so that she would have hope; then heard the voice of others also caught in the rubble; these strangers talked to each other and prayed w/each other until they were rescued; brought to a hospital in FL to recover, Mira was

asked why she didn't give up and her response was: nothing is impossible. (CNN interview)

The word of God reveals sin, but it also reveals hope to those who find themselves in despair.

What happens when the people gather to hear and proclaim God's word? Great things can happen – they can give voice to their faith and trust, bless God and be called to action upon hearing God's word

Our narrative lectionary experience soon takes a turn from the Old Testament to the New. We have been discovering where God is and where we find ourselves in God's story as well as what God wants for us. We've journeyed through some themes that remain within the Biblical story and one is that God continues to be faithful and work through a broken people.

Brokenness – the theme of friend's "Advent Letter"; not typical family Christmas letter; look forward to it each year; always seems to "fit" w/what doing and this is no exception:

Letter: "Kirk and I got the chance to see Sara Bareilles in concert recently. / Most poignant was her introduction to her latest album's title song, Kaleidoscope Heart. She talked about what a difficult time she had writing all the songs and how she had to go really deep to get her material. Like anyone who dares to take a good, hard look at herself, what she found wasn't always perfection. In fact, she realized that in many ways, she was a mess. What she also realized, though, was that all of the brokenness within her didn't make her ugly. In fact, when she brought all of her broken pieces to the light through her music, she realized that even in her brokenness – and maybe even because of it – she was beautiful. In her creative process, she had come to see her heart function as a kaleidoscope. (A kaleidoscope creates beautiful designs by reflecting the constantly changing patterns made by fragments – pieces." She challenged her fans to believe their own brokenness can be beautiful, too. And the crowd went absolutely crazy. / I realized that her message about brokenness and love isn't so different than the message God is trying to send us all the time, but maybe, particularly, in this season of Advent. This season, we celebrate a God of love. A God of love who dared to take a good, hard look at His creation. What God saw was brokenness. Broken countries. Broken systems. Broken rules. Broken people. What God saw was a mess. So, God came down. In the person of Jesus, God came down to reside right in the midst of it. To love us, despite our brokenness. To teach us how to start putting our pieces together. To be our Kaleidoscope so that our broken pieces might be illuminated and reflected beautifully for our own sakes, but even more for the sake of the world God loves."

God came down – we've been singing that song through Advent. God came down and brought light, love, peace and joy for you.

God came down, and in the breaking of the bread, the brokenness, we can be made whole. God came down and took the brokenness and made something beautiful out of all of our pieces.

It's not that the Old Testament story comes to a complete end and another one begins – The O.T. points to the future, the future that we celebrate this week in God's word – the story of Christ born to us as a savior and revealed to us in God's word – that good news is to bring great joy to all people.

Helpful Resources:

Narrative lectionary podcast

Rev. Dana Lee Simon's excellent Advent letter